

conclusion that passing merely accepted racial distinctions as a reality.<sup>21</sup> Citing the example of Aleksandr Pushkin and Alexandre Dumas, Chesnutt argued that Europeans did not hide their mixed ancestry “because it carried with it no social stigma or disability whatever.” Through these examples, Chesnutt argued that race was a “social fiction.” He believed that white society’s racial formulas neglected ability and virtue, which should be most relevant in defining one’s social status. Racial interbreeding would require society to rank its members based upon these terms. Chesnutt and Fulton disagreed about the importance of racial solidarity. Whereas Fulton promoted race pride, Chesnutt revealed his own views on race, color, and class in this series, writing, “[I]f, in time, the more objectionable Negro traits are eliminated, and his better qualities correspondingly developed, his part in the future American race may well be an important and valuable one.”<sup>22</sup> Rather than advocating race pride as Fulton had in *Hanover*, Chesnutt promoted the elimination of all racial distinctions in favor of ability and character.

Chesnutt wrote *The Marrow of Tradition* with two goals in mind. First, he hoped to entertain readers; he recognized that the future of his literary career depended upon the financial success of his novels. Second, Chesnutt crafted a “purpose novel” in order to educate Northerners about the racial problems unfolding in the South.<sup>23</sup> Chesnutt built his story around events with which his audience would be familiar. Although he based the novel in part upon the New Orleans Riot of 1900, he depended primarily on the events in Wilmington in 1898. He visited North Carolina in order to compile information for his manuscript. He received letters from North Carolinians describing black life after the 1898 election and the subsequent riot. As he revealed in a letter to the wife of former Wilmington resident William Henderson, the novel was also influenced by a story told to him by Dr. Thomas Mask, who still lived in the Port City. Mask recounted with “vivid description... of the events of the riot.”<sup>24</sup> His research offered a factual counter-weight to the public memory.

The novel centers on the white Carterets and the mulatto Millers, the leading families of Wellington. Major Carteret edits the Democratic *Morning Chronicle*, and Dr. William Miller operates a hospital in the black community. Their wives connect the two families; Olivia Carteret’s father married his housekeeper, who subsequently gave birth to Janet Miller. The Carteret family wishes to preserve the color line by concealing the familial relationship between Janet and Olivia, and the Millers wish to replace the color line with economic and social classifications.

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<sup>21</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pg. 173, 177.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Chesnutt, “A Stream of Dark Blood in the Veins of the Southern Whites” *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 25, 1900, in *Stories, Novels, and Essays*, pg. 854-855; “A Complete Race-Amalgamation Likely to Occur” *Boston Evening Transcript* September 1, 1900, in *Stories, Novels, and Essays*, pg. 861, 863; Stephen P. Knadler, “Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness,” *American Literary History* 8 (Autumn 1996): 429; Dean McWilliams, *Charles Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), pg. 54-55.

<sup>23</sup> Chesnutt, “Chesnutt’s Own View,” pg. 872. Chesnutt sent copies of *The Marrow of Tradition* to several congressmen. In ensuing correspondence, the politicians compared the novel with Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots*.

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Walter Hines Page, March 22, 1899, and Letter to Mrs. W.B. Henderson, November 11, 1905, published in *“To Be An Author”: Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905*, ed. by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Robert C. Leitz III (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997): pg. 121, 233-234.